Asclepias tuberosa Butterfly Weed, Indian Paintbrush

Edward F. Gilman

Introduction
Butterfly weed is a member of the milkweed family (Fig. 1). The plants grow to two feet tall and flower from July to September. The flower colors are orange, red, and yellow. The plant will not flower freely until well established. The best sites have exposure to sun or partial shade and almost any soil. The plant tolerates dry soil but not heavy soil. Butterfly weed is slow to start growth in the spring. Mark its location to prevent damage to easily injured dormant crowns. A taproot makes transplanting difficult. Once established do not disturb butterfly weed unnecessarily.

General Information
Scientific name: Asclepias tuberosa
Pronunciation: ass-KLEE-pee-us too-bur-O-suh
Common name(s): butterfly weed, Indian paintbrush
Family: Asclepiadaceae
Plant type: herbaceous; annual
USDA hardiness zones: 8 through 10 (Fig. 2)
Planting month for zone 7: Jun; Jul
Planting month for zone 8: May; Jun; Jul; Aug
Planting month for zone 9: Mar; Apr; May; Jun; Jul; Aug; Sep
Planting month for zone 10 and 11: Feb; Mar; Apr; May; Jun; Jul; Aug; Sep; Oct; Nov; Dec
Origin: native to Florida
Uses: naturalizing; cut flowers; attracts butterflies; mass planting; attracts hummingbirds
Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant

Figure 1. Butterfly weed.

Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.
**Description**

Height: 2 to 3 feet  
Spread: 2 to 3 feet  
Plant habit: round; upright  
Plant density: moderate  
Growth rate: fast  
Texture: medium

**Foliage**

Leaf arrangement: alternate  
Leaf type: simple  
Leaf margin: entire  
Leaf shape: oblong  
Leaf venation: parallel  
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous  
Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches  
Leaf color: green  
Fall color: not applicable  
Fall characteristic: not applicable

**Flower**

Flower color: red; yellow  
Flower characteristic: summer flowering; spring flowering

**Fruit**

Fruit shape: unknown  
Fruit length: unknown  
Fruit cover: unknown  
Fruit color: unknown  
Fruit characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

**Trunk and Branches**

Trunk/bark/branches: not applicable  
Current year stem/twig color: green  
Current year stem/twig thickness: thick

**Culture**

Light requirement: plant grows in full sun  
Soil tolerances: acidic; sand; loam; clay  
Drought tolerance: moderate  
Soil salt tolerances: poor  
Plant spacing: 18 to 24 inches

**Other**

Roots: not applicable  
Winter interest: no special winter interest  
Outstanding plant: plant has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

**Invasive potential:** may self-seed each year  
**Pest resistance:** very sensitive to one or more pests or diseases which can affect plant health or aesthetics

**Use and Management**

As the name implies, this is one of many small plants that attract butterflies to the landscape. One to several plants is usually all that is needed to draw butterflies to the garden. There are reports that *Asclepias* has a tendency to escape cultivation and may seed into the landscape. They grow naturally in dry sandy soil along roadsides from New England to Colorado, Texas and into Florida.

Raw roots have been eaten to treat bronchial ailments. Roots have also been taken internally for gas, hemorrhaging and other ailments.

Propagation is by seed or division in the spring. The seed germinates in 3 to 4 weeks at 70 to 75-degrees F. Plants maybe planted in a cold frame in spring or fall. Fresh seed may need chilling.

**Pest and Diseases**

Aphids may infest butterfly weed.

Leaf spot diseases are seen but not serious.

Rusts cause the formation of reddish colored spots.

Cucumber mosaic virus causes leaf mottling but no chemical control is available.